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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Karma of the Killing Fields

By SICHAN SIV

[French](#) - [Spanish](#)

ON April 17, 1975, I was a young man working for CARE in Phnom Penh. As I drove to my office on the Avenue de France at 7 a.m., I saw a group of heavily armed black-clad zombies walking toward the city center and me. I reversed quickly and went to the Hotel Le Royal, which had been turned into a Red Cross neutral zone. A doctor friend signaled for me to go to the side entrance opposite the National Library. He waited inside while I climbed over the locked gate. He and his colleagues had set up an emergency room at one of the bungalows to treat the wounded. They asked if I could be the interpreter. I said yes.

I spent all day with the medical staff, coming out briefly for fresh air, and seeing the Khmer Rouge being welcomed by Phnom Penh residents. We all thought: "The war is over, we will now have peace! We are all Cambodians and will work together to rebuild the country." But any euphoria was short-lived. The Khmer Rouge immediately ordered the capital to be emptied, saying that the United States was going to bomb it.

Red Cross nurses told me they were going to take refuge at the French Embassy. I found my brother, whom I had earlier asked to go to the hotel for safety. We drove to the French compound but were not allowed in. I took off my white undershirt and tied it to the car antenna as a sign of peace. We had to pass through various barricades before getting to our older sister's house. Everyone was packed and ready to depart.

A survivor's journey from Cambodia to the White House.

I had had the chance to leave Cambodia five days earlier, on April 12, when the American Embassy was being evacuated. Although I was told to be at the embassy within an hour, my mind was with some 3,000 refugee families in Kampong Speu, 30 miles southwest. That morning, I was to meet with the governor to arrange for airlifts of food and medical supplies to them. I thought that the meeting would save the lives of those sick and hungry people. When I later arrived at the embassy, I was told that the last chopper had taken off 30 minutes before.

Our family left that evening of April 17, the darkest night of our lives, with just what we could carry. Three million people were trying to get out at the same time. Many died along the roads to nowhere from hardship, exhaustion and summary execution. We saw decomposing bodies with arms tied

behind their backs, a woman with her baby still at her breast. My mother, a devout Buddhist, whispered that our bad karma could be responsible, saying, "We must have done something very bad in our previous life to go through this kind of suffering." I said it could not be, because the entire country was being turned into a land soaked with blood and tears, a hell on earth.

It took us 10 days to make it to Tonle Bati, my father's native village, usually reached in one hour by car. We were immediately put to forced labor. I planned my escape as soon as I realized that as someone who had worked for an American organization, I was endangering everyone else. With my mother's blessings, I rode a bicycle for three weeks, zigzagging some 500 miles from the southeastern part of Cambodia - the so-called Parrot's Beak-to the northwest.

Using faked passes, I made it to Sisophon, where Highways 5 and 6 merged toward Thailand. There, I was stopped and put into a Khmer Rouge mobile work unit. By then, I had thrown away my eyeglasses, a sign of education that earmarked one for elimination. I had already changed my identity; my mantra was "I see nothing; I hear nothing; I know nothing." Each night, after 18 hours of hard labor, I prayed that if my mother's milk were dear, I would see freedom.

On Feb. 13, 1976, I jumped off a logging truck near the famed 12th century temple of Banteay Chhmar and began a three-day flight through the heavily mined and patrolled jungle with nothing to drink or eat. I fell in a booby trap and was severely wounded. In Thailand, I was jailed for illegal entry and later transferred to a camp where I taught English to fellow refugees.

On June 4, 1976, I arrived at the home of my refugee sponsor family in Wallingford, Conn., with two dollars in my pocket. I was full of hope and eager to start my new life as a free man. I picked apples, washed dishes, and cooked hamburgers in Connecticut and drove a taxi in New York. I did whatever came my way, eventually volunteering for the 1988 presidential campaign of George Bush, who made me one of his deputy assistants at the White House, exactly 13 years after my escape to freedom began.

I came to learn that my mother, along with my older sister, brother and their families, had been clubbed to death by the Khmer Rouge. Of the 16 of us who left Phnom Penh together on April 17, 1975, I am the only survivor. As we look back on the 30th anniversary of the killing fields, I hope we can once again remember this tragedy and vow "Never again!" But after the world's failure to act in Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, I wonder if these words mean anything.

Sichan Siv is a United States ambassador to the United Nations

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